

Matthew 11, Call to Decision

Overview

This chapter completes the structure that began in 4:18 (Figure 1).

Note at the outset the parallelism of this chapter, and in particular the closing invitation (11:28), with the call of the Four (4:18-22) and of the Twelve (9:36-10:4). Now the Lord opens the door to “all ye who labor and are heavy laden,” inviting us all to follow him.

Calling Disciples	4:18-22 the Four		9:36-10:4 the Twelve	11:2-30 Broader Invitation (v. 28)
Summary	4:23 And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people.		9:35 And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people.	Mat 11:1 And it came to pass, when Jesus had made an end of commanding his twelve disciples, he departed thence to teach and to preach in their cities.
Detail	ch. 5-7 Content for Teaching		ch. 8-9 Examples of Healing	10:5-42 Exhortations for Preaching

Figure 1: Structure of ch. 4-11

The key to the structure of the chapter, and indeed to the rest of this section through 14:20, is to note the shift in the ones to whom the Lord is speaking. This is narrative material, and the major structuring device is the scene (change in person, place, or time—in this case, mostly persons).

2-6, John’s Question and the Lord’s Answer

The chapter begins with the Lord’s response to a question posed by John.

2 Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ,--We learned in 4:12 that John was imprisoned. We’ll hear more about the reason in ch. 14: he condemned Herod’s marital conduct. His arrest was the event that stimulated the blossoming of the Lord’s ministry.

The use of “Christ” here is unusual. It is not yet a name for Jesus of Nazareth, but rather, the title of the expected Messiah. That is, what he had heard was not that his cousin was doing marvelous things, but that the works prophesied of the Messiah were taking place.

He doubts the reliability of the rumors he hears in prison, and he wants to verify whether this is indeed the case.

he sent two of his disciples,--Luke tells us that he summoned these disciples for this purpose, so the number is important. It is the number of witnesses required to establish a matter at the law (Deut 19:15). John is not just curious. The identify of the Messiah is a matter of great significance, which he wishes to establish as carefully as he can.

3 And said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?--John had

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confidently declared that one of his disciples would be the one to bring God's judgment on the wicked and introduce the New Covenant blessings of the Holy Spirit (chart):

Mat 3:11 I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and *with* fire: 12 Whose fan *is* in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

He had recognized Jesus as that one, but this mission of judgment hardly seems compatible with John's present situation, languishing in Herod's prison. Like his contemporaries, he expected the Messiah to overthrow the enemies of God's people, yet he is now appears to be the one who is overthrown. He has heard rumors that the promised signs are being done, but not from reliable sources. So he sends to the Lord for reassurance.

We should all be as diligent in exploring spiritual issues. Too often we are careless, picking up opinions casually. We should exercise a discerning mind in spiritual matters.

The Lord responds in two ways:

1. He reassures John with the Scriptures.
2. He commends John to the people, which shows us that in spite of his discouragement, John is still a godly servant of the Lord.

We might compare John with Thomas in John 20, truly loving the Lord, yet thrown off track by discouraging circumstances (John by his imprisonment, Thomas by that of the Lord). These episodes are a precious encouragement to us, living as we do in "this present evil age" (Gal 1:4). Sometimes we feel like John or Thomas. What we need from one another is reassurance (from the Scriptures, as with John, or with observations about the facts of the matter, as with Thomas). Being discouraged does not mean that we have failed. It is a common challenge for God's people, and one in which we need one another's help.

4 Jesus answered and said unto them,--His response has two parts: pointing out some important facts, and references to the Scriptures.

Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see:--The first part is a reminder of the miracles that he has performed, which Matthew has collected in ch. 8-9.

We tend to see the world through our own assumptions, and if we are discouraged, we overlook data that should encourage us. One part of encouraging somebody is to call their attention to things that they may have missed.

The Lord's report is selective. The healings reflect the miracles collected in ch. 8-9, but notably omit the casting out of demons and the stilling of the sea. And he adds the bit about preaching the gospel to the poor. These adjustments suggest a second part of his response: drawing John's attention to the prophecies about his coming.

5 The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.--These seven

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Matt 11	Matt 8-9	Isa 35	Isa 61	2 Kings 4-5
5 The blind receive their sight,	9:27-31 two blind men	5a Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,		
and the lame walk,	8:5-13 centurion's servant 9:2-8 palsied man	6a Then shall the lame man leap as an hart,		
the lepers are cleansed,	8:1-4 leper			2 Ki 5 Naaman
and the deaf hear,	9:32-33 dumb man	5b and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.		
the dead are raised up,	9:18-25 Jairus' Daughter			2 Ki 4 Shunammite's son
and the poor have the gospel preached to them.	4:23; 9:35; "preaching the gospel of the kingdom		1 the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek;	

Table 1: OT Allusions in Matt 11:5

observations, all based in what we have seen, correspond to three different passages in the OT (chart, Table 1).

Isa 35:5-6 promised physical healings in the coming kingdom, and the Lord demonstrated these in the events reported in ch. 8-9.

- He healed two blind men in 9:27-31.
- He caused two palsied men to walk: the centurion's servant in 8:5-13, and the man who was brought to him in the house in 9:2-8.
- He healed a deaf man in 9:32-33, and we are to understand that deafness usually resulted in dumbness, the inability to speak.

Isaiah also anticipated (61:1) that the Lord would preach good tidings to the meek. In the summary verses that frame ch. 5-10, we read twice that

Matt. 4:23 Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people. (cf. 9:35).

In ch. 10 he sent out his disciples to carry on the same ministry. His final claim that "the poor have the gospel preached to them" points to the fulfillment of this Messianic promise as well.

But Isaiah says nothing about healing lepers or raising the dead, which the Lord also did, and which he highlights here. Why does the Lord mention them?

These two miracles are associated with Elisha in 2 Kings 4-5. There are two reasons for the Lord to remind John of Elisha.

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1. Like Joshua and Isaiah, the name “Elisha” anticipates the name “Jesus” that the angel told Joseph to give to Mary’s son. It means “God saves,” as the other three mean “Jehovah saves.” This name in turn would remind John that the purpose of the Messiah is not primarily to destroy, but to save.
2. Elisha, like Joshua, is an example of a successful disciple, one who went on to do miracles greater than any associated with Elijah. Recall John’s statement that Jesus “cometh after me” (3:11), which suggests that Jesus was among the disciples of John. John may be discouraged because of the end of his own ministry, but he should recognize that his disciple, and therefore his own ministry, is flourishing. He should think of himself as similar to Elijah, a comparison that the Lord will make in a few verses.

6 And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended σκανδαλιζω in me.--The Lord describes John’s response as “being offended.” As a child, we may have been offended if somebody brings us a gift and it isn’t what we expect: “Thank aunty for the lovely birthday gift of new underwear.”

The Lord was not the kind of Messiah that John, or many of the other Jews, expected, and some of them rejected him as a result. This is a risk anticipated in the OT and echoed in the NT (chart):

Isa. 8:13 Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself; and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. 14 And he shall be for a sanctuary; but for **a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence** to both the houses of Israel, for a gin and for a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. 15 And many among them shall stumble, and fall, and be broken, and be snared, and be taken. (cf. Rom 9:33)

1 Cor. 1:23-24 But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a **stumblingblock σκανδαλον**, and unto the Greeks foolishness; 24 But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

We are always at risk if we expect God to offer us the kind of salvation that we imagine. But we will be blessed if we receive the Lord Jesus and let him bring what he deems best.

The problem that the Lord anticipates here is *taking* offense: the fault lies in the one observing the Lord. More commonly we need to be careful about *giving* offense, as the Lord warns later:

Matt. 18:7 Woe unto the world because of **offences σκανδαλον!** for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!

And Paul picks up the warning:

Rom. 14:13 Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an **occasion to fall σκανδαλον** in *his* brother's way.

Note the contrast with the Lord. According to Isa 8:13 and attested in Matt 11:6, offenses come by him, yet the “woe” of Matt 18:7 does not apply to him. The Lord is perfect: if there is offense concerning him, the fault lies with those who take offense. But because of the power of the flesh, we are apt to give offense inappropriately, stumble, and need to be on our guard.

7-19, To the Multitudes: John vs. This Generation

Next he speaks to the multitudes who were continually following him, and who had no doubt overheard the exchange with the disciples of John. He characterizes John's character, then warns them of a danger to which they are exposed.

7-15, *Characterization of John*

7 ... **the multitudes** ...--This term shows the fascination that the Lord elicited from the common people. He attracted much attention, but that attention did not always lead to faith. The gospels regularly distinguish "the multitudes" from "the disciples."¹

In the Sermon, the Lord drew the disciples apart from the multitudes:

Matt. 4:25 And there followed him great **multitudes** of people from Galilee, and *from* Decapolis, and *from* Jerusalem, and *from* Judaea, and *from* beyond Jordan. 5:1 And seeing the **multitudes**, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his **disciples** came unto him: 2 And he opened his mouth, and taught them,

In ch. 13, he gives the parables to the multitudes, but then explains them to the disciples:

Matt. 13:36 Then Jesus sent the multitude away, and went into the house: and his disciples came unto him, saying, Declare unto us the parable of the tares of the field.

In Luke, he lays down criteria for making the transition from "multitude" to "disciple":

Lk. 14:25 And there went great multitudes with him: and he turned, and said unto them,

- 26 If any *man* come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, **he cannot be my disciple.**
- 27 And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, **cannot be my disciple.**
- ... 33 So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, **he cannot be my disciple.**

In our age of viral marketing, generating buzz, and seeing what's trending, this distinction is key. Many may show interest, but few will become disciples. One recalls John's report:

Jn. 2:23 Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast *day*, many believed πιστευω in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did. 24 But Jesus did not commit πιστευω himself unto them, because he knew all *men*,

This in turn anticipates Paul's exhortation to the Galatians,

Gal. 4:9 But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?

Salvation is a work of God's grace in our hearts, not something that is under our control. We

¹ See notes for passages emphasizing this distinction.

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must offer it to all, but not be deceived by initial responses.

7 And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John,--The Lord's questions address possible misunderstandings by the multitude of John's question.² John is trying to verify rumors, but the multitudes are likely to think that he is wavering.

What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind?--They had flocked after the John just as they were now flocking after the Lord. Did they go out to see someone who wavered with the wind, like a bullrush by the Jordan? If they recall the courage with which John spoke, and which drew them to him, they would realize that he is not a waverer.

8 But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses.--Sarcastically, the Lord suggests that John has grown soft because he is now living with Herod. John was indeed in Herod's palace, but in the dungeon. He is not being pampered and thus tempted to change his convictions. He is languishing in prison because of his principles.

9 But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet.--Indeed, they held him for a prophet, and they should respect his diligence and steadfastness as a prophet. To support this, the Lord cites two verses from the OT that John fulfills, vv. 10, 14. Both are from Malachi (chart).

Because these two citations frame the paragraph, we should look more closely for a chiasm, and vv. 11 and 13 do seem to correspond (chart, Table 2). Let's consider the verses by pairs.

The outermost verses identify John with Malachi's promised herald.

The Herald	10 For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.	14 And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come.
The Change	11 Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.	13 For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.
What to Expect	12 And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.	

Table 2: The Chiasm of Matt 11:10-14

10 For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.--The first reference is from ch. 3.

Mal 3:1 Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts.

The interesting thing about this citation is the shift from "before me" to "before thee." In Malachi, God is sending his messenger to prepare his own way. Our Lord adjusts the wording to emphasize that he is the one of whom the Lord speaks: he takes Malachi's verse as a personal

² The early Greek commentator Chrysostom (AD 349-407) captures the flow of the narrative: "The common people might from the inquiry of John's disciples form many strange suspicions, not knowing the mind with which he sent his disciples."

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promise to him, the Son, that the Father will send the messenger before him.

14 And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come.--The second reference, in v. 14, is a chapter later, in Malachi 4:

Mal 4:5 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD:

We have seen that the title of Elijah is particularly appropriate in view of the similarities, in both name and miracles, between our Lord and Elisha, the disciple of Elijah.

The opening caveat, “if ye will receive it,” warns that some in “the multitudes” are not ready to recognize John as Elijah, and thus Jesus as “the Lord” who has “suddenly come to his temple.”

The next pair of verses, 11 and 13, emphasize the change that John’s coming marks. Malachi anticipates this change. Six times between 3:1 and 4:5 he speaks of the coming “day,” that is, the day of the Lord; the word appears nowhere else in Malachi.

11 Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.--This verse compares John with “he that is least in the kingdom of heaven.” The word “least” is the adjective μικρός,³ which our Lord uses elsewhere⁴ to describe young, immature believers, those whom Paul would call “babes in Christ” (chart):

Matt. 10:42 And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these **little ones** a cup of cold *water* only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward.

Matt. 18:6 But whoso shall offend one of these **little ones** which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and *that* he were drowned in the depth of the sea. ... 10 Take heed that ye despise not one of these **little ones**; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven. ... 14 Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these **little ones** should perish.

The comparison is puzzling. John was a focused, disciplined servant of the Lord. How can he be reckoned lower in comparison with an immature, carnal believer?

The resolution seems to be one of temporal distinction. John and our Lord both preached that at the time of John’s ministry the kingdom of heaven was “at hand.” But it had not yet arrived. We can point to two key events, neither of which John experienced: the grant of the kingdom to our Lord, and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

3 Not to be confused with ελαχιστος in 5:19, which I parse differently. See notes there. Here the “least person” is in the kingdom; there, he is not (by my reading).

4 The regularity of this usage favors this conclusion over the view of Chrysostom and Augustine, continued by some later authors, that the Lord is humbly referring to himself, using μικροτερος to refer to his younger age. Neither he nor John ever makes a point of his cadency, and John himself insists that Jesus is “mightier than I” (3:11) and “must increase” while John decreases (John 3:30).

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In our study of 10:23 we saw that at some point between the crucifixion and Matt 28, the scene depicted in Daniel 7 had unfolded, in which the Ancient of Days grants authority over all nations to the Son of Man. On the basis of this event, our Lord could say to his disciples in Matt 28:18, “All authority is given unto me in heaven and in earth,” and could send them to “all nations.” Dan 7:18 goes on to say that “the saints of the Most High” (whom we have identified with the Son of Man) “shall take the kingdom, and possess the kingdom for ever, even for ever and ever.” This exalted position belongs to the least in the kingdom, but John did not experience it during his earthly life.

The second event is the coming of the Holy Spirit to indwell God’s people on the day of Pentecost, an event anticipated by all three of the major prophets as central to the coming Day of the Lord.⁵ The restoration temple was more glorious than Solomon’s (Hag 2:9), not because of its physical splendor, but because the Lord Jesus entered it (Mal 3:1). Even so, the least mature believer, indwelt by the Spirit under the New Covenant, enjoys a position far beyond John’s experience during his earthly life.⁶

The prophets looked forward to the privilege that even lowly people would enjoy in the coming kingdom. The Lord may have in mind Zechariah’s prophecy:

Zech. 12:8 In that day shall the LORD defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and **he that is feeble among them at that day shall be as David**; and the house of David *shall be* as God, as the angel of the LORD before them.

And we should be clear that our Lord’s comments about John here refer to his earthly pilgrimage. In the resurrection, we would not expect the distinction made here to persist any longer.

13 For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.--Under the proposed chiasmic scheme, v. 13 corresponds with v. 11. And indeed, it presents a temporal distinction. John lived in the era of prophecy, when “the prophets and the law” looked forward to the promised kingdom. Now the king has come, and the kingdom is beginning to manifest itself in his teaching, preaching, and healing. The promise is now becoming reality, introducing an order that John was not allowed to enter. We should rejoice that we are allowed to live in the kingdom.

Malachi himself emphasizes the change that vv. 11 and 13 present. Six times in ch. 3-4 he mentions “the day,” that is, of the Lord (3:2, 17; 4:1, 3, 5), and pictures it as the rising of “the Sun of Righteousness” (4:2); nowhere else in his prophecy does he discuss this coming “day.” John was a night watchman. He saw the glowing of the dawn on the horizon, but did not live to enjoy the full glory of the Sun of Righteousness.

12 And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.--The verse at the center of the chiasm has long puzzled Bible students. Each half of it can be read in at least two different ways, suggesting four different interpretations (chart, Table 3).

⁵ See my studies on “Seeking the Kingdom of God” presented at Curtis Gospel Chapel in Oct 2015.

⁶ This insight is due to David Nelson.

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The verb in the first clause is a passive, so the KJV translation is formally literal, and the meaning would be that the kingdom is under attack. However, Greek sometimes uses passive verb *forms* with an active *sense*.⁷ Then the first clause would be saying, “The kingdom of heaven advances violently” or with great force, a very different picture.

Grammatically, this particular verb is most common as a

deponent, so the positive sense would be most natural, and certainly fits the swarm of miracles that the Lord has been demonstrating.

The second clause offers a similar ambiguity. The most straightforward reading of the “violent men” and “take by force” is negative, and this would go well with the notion that the kingdom is under violent attack. But if we take the first verb as deponent, meaning that the kingdom is advancing powerfully, then we are tempted to understand this clause as describing the courage required of those who would meet its demands and enter into it.

Rather than arguing from these verses alone, we may be able to gain some insight by recalling how our Lord is preoccupied with Malachi 3-4 throughout this section. The opening and closing prophecies of John come from Malachi, and the change that John heralds is also a theme of these chapters. Clearly, in thinking about the work of John, he is meditating on Malachi 3-4. Do these chapters say anything else that might help us understand v. 12?

They do. Malachi emphasizes the power with which the Lord will come (chart):

Mal. 3:2 But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? **for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap:**

Mal. 3:5 And I will come near to you to **judgment**; and I will be **a swift witness** against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in *his* wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger *from his right*, and fear not me, saith the LORD of hosts.

Mal. 4:1 For, behold, the day cometh, that shall **burn as an oven**; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be **stubble**: and **the day that cometh shall burn them up**, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.

Mal 4:3 And **ye shall tread down the wicked**; for they shall be ashes under the soles of

		The kingdom of heaven ...	
		Negative: suffers violence	Positive: advances forcefully
The Violent ...	Negative: those who attack the kingdom	The attacks of wicked men are taking their toll on the kingdom.	The kingdom is advancing, in spite of the opposition of wicked men who seek to take it over for their own purposes.
	Positive: eagerness of people to press into the kingdom	Everybody is trying to get into the kingdom, though it is under attack (by whom?)	The kingdom is advancing and everyone wants to join

Table 3: Interpretive Possibilities for Matt 11:12

⁷ The technical name for such a use is a “deponent verb,” and this verb (βιάζομαι) is frequently used thus.

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your feet in the day that I shall do *this*, saith the LORD of hosts.

These verses support the idea that the kingdom of God is advancing with great power. We have seen this in this chapter, in our Lord's report to John in v. 5.

At the same time, these chapters of Malachi also highlight the opposition of wicked people:

Mal. 3:8 Will a man rob God? Yet **ye have robbed me**. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. 9 Ye *are* cursed with a curse: for **ye have robbed me**, *even* this whole nation.

Mal. 3:13 **Your words have been stout against me**, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, What have we spoken *so much* against thee? 14 Ye have said, It *is* vain to serve God: and what profit *is it* that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts? 15 And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, *they that* tempt God are even delivered.

In spite of its power, the wicked do not submit to the kingdom, but rebel against it, and even seek to "take it by force." In fact, this is just what has happened over and over during the history of the church. Wicked people seek to twist and distort the simplicity of the NT pattern into something that serves their personal interests.

Thus understood, v. 12 is a summary of what has happened to John. Herod pretends to be a devout Jew, yet casts John into prison and ultimately executes him. And it is a summary of the world that all of Matthew prepares us to expect, a world in which God's kingdom advances powerfully, changing lives, driving back the forces of darkness, and yet violent men continue to oppose it, persecuting those who follow the Lord. This is a world in which God's people must bless those who persecute them and be on the lookout for false prophets, wolves in sheep's clothing. This is the world in which we live.

15 He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.--Like the initial clause in v. 14, this concluding verse emphasizes the mixed character of the multitudes. Not all among them are ready to recognize John as the forerunner, and Jesus as the Messiah.

16-19, Criticism of "this generation"

There is no indication of a change in audience (as there is in v. 20), so probably he is including the multitudes in this description.

16 But whereunto shall I liken this generation?--"Generation" γενεα is a common word in the Greek Bible, occurring 184 times in the LXX (where it translates דור), and 42 times in Matthew. He uses it 13x, more than any other NT book with the exception of Luke (14x). It has two possible meanings: one temporal, and one ethical.

The initial meaning of the word is temporal. It describes a period of time corresponding to a human lifespan, and the people who live during that period. For example, Psalms often speaks of something enduring "to all generations." There are four clear instances of this usage in Matthew,

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all in one verse:

Matt. 1:17 So all the **generations** from Abraham to David *are* fourteen **generations**; and from David until the carrying away into Babylon *are* fourteen **generations**; and from the carrying away into Babylon unto Christ *are* fourteen **generations**.

People who live during the same period and experience the same history often have shared ideas and values, and so the term came to refer to people of any age who share the same ethical values.

Ps. 14:5 There were they in great fear: for God *is* in the **generation** of the righteous.

Ps. 24:6 This *is* the **generation** of them that seek him, that seek thy face, O Jacob.

Ps. 73:15 If I say, I will speak thus; behold, I should offend *against* the **generation** of thy children.

Ps. 112:2 His seed shall be mighty upon earth: the **generation** of the upright shall be blessed.

The Psalmist doesn't mean to restrict these statements to a single period of time. The focus is on the ethical condition of the people, not when they live

Matthew contains several clear instances of this ethical usage:

Matt. 12:39 But he answered and said unto them, An **evil and adulterous generation** seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: *so vv. 41, 42 are likely used in this same sense*

Matt. 12:45 Then goeth he, and taketh with himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there: and the last *state* of that man is worse than the first. Even so shall it be also unto **this wicked generation**.

Matt. 16:4 A **wicked and adulterous generation** seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas. And he left them, and departed.

Matt. 17:17 Then Jesus answered and said, O **faithless and perverse generation**, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him hither to me.

He is not making a temporal statement. The Jews of the first century were not worse than those of previous ages. In fact, he characterizes them as continuing a long tradition of hypocrisy:

Matt. 23:29 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, 30 And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. 31 Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. 32 Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers.

v. 16 is the first use of the term after 1:17, and in what follows, the Lord is clearly making an ethical evaluation rather than a temporal one. What he says here is not true just of people in the first century, but of people in every age.

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It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows,--Children love to make believe, acting out the things they see their elders do.

17 And saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced;--Elders rejoice for true joy (for example, at a wedding or the birth of a child). But children can decide to laugh and dance just because they are pretending. They are not celebrating a true triumph. They have agreed to have a pretend party, and their joy comes from this made-up circumstance, not from true life.

The world, not knowing the Lord, has no understanding of the deep sources of joy for the human, and has to make up superficial, pretend things about which they agree to sing and dance. Then, when the believer does not join in their mirth, they are critical. Peter captures this dynamic:

1 Pet. 4:3 For the time past of *our* life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries: 4 Wherein they **think it strange** that ye run not with *them* to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of *you*:

we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented.--As soon as the wedding game ends, children may decide to have a pretend funeral. Nobody has died, but they all agree on some imaginary disaster, and then mourn the way they have seen their elders mourn.

Again, this is the way of the world. They are oblivious to the true disasters that surround us: open rebellion against heaven's high king, and the impending judgment that must fall. Instead, they make up things about which to mourn. Ezekiel gives an example.

Ezek. 8:14 Then he brought me to the door of the gate of the LORD'S house which *was* toward the north; and, behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz.

Tammuz was a Babylonian god whose death and resurrection was thought to correspond to the winter and summer. Manmade religions often give people an excuse for play-mourning and play-rejoicing. But it is all superficial, driven by agreement among peers and not reality.

Now the Lord goes on to show the effect of this pretend-emotion on truly godly people, whose emotions are driven by the real nature of the world.

18 For John came neither eating nor drinking,--John came to focus people's attention on their sin, and warn them of coming judgment. This is really something about which we should mourn, and John's whole demeanor was one of sobriety and abstinence. He wore rough clothing, like someone in sackcloth and ashes, to demonstrate the repentance to which he was calling people.

and they say, He hath a devil.--"This generation" didn't want to heed his warning. To cover their guilty consciences, they have a pretend party. His refusal to join in their play reminded them of their guilt.

19 The Son of man came eating and drinking,--His first miracle was to turn water to wine at the marriage in Cana, an occasion for true rejoicing. His ministry was to provide redemption and deliver people from their sin. This is a cause for true rejoicing, and he did not hesitate to recline at the table with those who were interested in his message.

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and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners.--“This generation” didn’t want to heed his teaching and accept his salvation. So they slandered his message of joy. They called him to mourn, but with the joy of salvation secured, why should we mourn? Again, their emotion is pretend, hiding their true condition.

But wisdom is justified of her children.--The Lord illustrates the behavior of “this generation” with children playing in the marketplace. But he and John are not part of this group of children. They belong to another group of children, those who follow Wisdom. Their behavior may disappoint their contemporaries, but it vindicates the instruction that Wisdom has given them.

The Lord’s personification of Wisdom as a woman reminds us of the book of Proverbs. The book doesn’t talk about wisdom’s offspring, but it does give considerable instruction to the younger generation as Solomon repeatedly instructs “my son.”

What does this reference bring to the discussion of crowd pressure on “this generation”? A persistent theme throughout Proverbs is that conduct is to be guided by fundamental principles, not by what those around us are doing:

Prov. 1:10 My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not.

Pro 13:20 He that walketh with wise men shall be wise: but a companion of fools shall be destroyed.

Prov. 29:24 Whoso is partner with a thief hateth his own soul: he heareth cursing, and bewrayeth it not.

“This generation” regulates itself by its own ideas, reinforced by peer pressure, and criticizes those who do not go along with it. Thus it may contradict itself, like the children at play, for it has no certain compass. This is the weakness of the multitude in Matthew. While Jesus is in vogue, they flock around him, but can just as easily abandon him. The only firm basis for a godly life is to be a child of wisdom; to know God’s word and follow it.

20-24, Reproof of the Unbelievers

The multitudes are still listening, but now the Lord addresses himself to those who are not following him, even as part of the multitude.

20 Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not:--This verse makes two points of interest.

First, the cities that saw “most” of his mighty works were notable for their lack of response. But there were other cities that he does not single out for rebuke, who witnessed some of his works:

Matt. 9:35 And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people.

This note shows that we cannot blame someone’s lack of response on not having enough

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exposure to the truth. The cities that were most exposed to the good news still did not respond appropriately. We do need to present the truth, but where the Spirit is working, the seed will take root, and where he is not working, dumping extra seed will not make a difference.

Note second how the Lord describes their lack of response. He does not fault them for not believing, but for not repenting. Belief can refer to a saving commitment to the Lord Jesus, but it can also reflect a superficial agreement with statements about the Lord that does not issue from a work of God in the heart. Our Lord and John the Baptist called on people to repent.

This word also appears in the LXX, translating Hebrew. In the OT, the subject of the verb is mostly God, often in descriptions of situations where God holds back his wrath in order to spare sinful people (Exod 32:14; Jon 3:10). The repentance of God is not just a change of attitude. It profoundly affects his behavior. He withholds the judgment that he had thought to bring. Similarly, our repentance is not just a change in our thoughts, but a reversal in our conduct.

It's also worth noting that in the NT, the subject of the verb is never (so far as I can find) God. Before the cross, the only way to spare sinful people was for God to hold back his wrath, but now a substitute has been provided. God does not withhold his wrath; he has released it in full upon his son for those who will receive him, and others must bear it themselves.

21 Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida!--See the map (chart, Chorazin was about two miles north of Capernaum. The location of Bethsaida is uncertain. There is a famous Bethsaida on the other side of the Jordan, but the description of "Bethsaida of Galilee" (John 12:21) suggests another, since the famous one is not in the area usually called Galilee. In addition, Peter lived in Bethsaida (John 1:44), and the Lord frequently visited his home when he was in Capernaum (Mark 1:29), something that would be difficult across the Jordan, unless Peter had moved into Capernaum. There is some



Figure 2: Locations of the doomed cities

reason to associate this Bethsaida with a site along the shore of the Sea of Galilee about two miles west of Capernaum. If this is so, these two villages were less than an hour's walk from Capernaum. The Lord would often have passed through them on his way to other locations, and they could go to Capernaum for more instruction if they wished.

for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.--The Lord, who knows the hearts, can tell what would have been the response of each person.

22 But I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you.--Given that Tyre, Sidon, Chorazin, and Bethsaida will be condemned, what advantage accrues to the first two cities? Are there different levels of discomfort in hell, as Dante

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imagined in his Inferno? Perhaps. In addition, the increased discomfort of the Galilean cities will be due to their memory, throughout eternity, of the clear evidence that they received, and their remorse over having rejected the opportunity they had.

2 Cor. 6:2 For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now *is* the accepted time; behold, now *is* the day of salvation.

There is a time of acceptance. Isa 61:2, which predicts our Lord's ministry, anticipates "the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God." Praise God, the vengeance is assigned only to a day, while the acceptance endures for a year, but one day the door will shut, and the opportunity will be no more.

23 And thou, Capernaum,--Now he turns his attention to Capernaum, giving essentially the same message, but with one addition.

which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell:--Here is the additional information. Because the Lord's base of operations was Capernaum, this city's privilege was greater than the others, and its judgment would be correspondingly greater.⁸

for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. 24 But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee.--Capernaum, like Bethsaida and Chorazin, will regret its haste in rejecting the Lord's call to repent.

25-26 Thanksgiving to the Father

The previous two sections contrast the enthusiasm of the multitudes with the coldness and hardness of Chorazin and Bethsaida. Most of us would be excited about the first and discouraged about the second, but for the Lord, both are evidence of his Father's sovereignty, and both call forth thanksgiving.

25 At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth,--This is an amazing combination of titles—the accessibility of "Father," together with the absolute sovereignty implied by "Lord of heaven and earth." Often these two characteristics of God are seen as in tension, but our Lord saw them as both true. This combination of accessibility and sovereignty is a hallmark of the end of the chapter.

because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.--Note two things about the behavior for which he thanks the Father.

First, he takes it for granted that it is the Father who both hides and reveals himself. Many are reluctant to recognize that the Father must reveal Christ to sinners before they can respond. Many more, who accept that the Father must reveal Christ, are reluctant to acknowledge that he

⁸ One should also note here the echo of Isaiah's condemnation of the king of Babylon in 14:13-15. Capernaum has become no better than the ancient oppressor of Israel.

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hides salvation from others. But our Lord clearly teaches both.

Second, he thanks the Father for both revelation and obscurity. He does not shy away from the Father's practice of hiding his truth from some, but gives thanks for it. Because the Father does it, it is good, and we should be thankful for it.

In fact, the Lord's thanksgiving for God's work of hiding the truth shows how he coped with rejection. He recognizes that it is not personal, but the fruit of sin on the part of those whom God has chosen to exclude from the knowledge of salvation. In thanking God for this hiding, he is reminding himself

The central principle here is that when we are secure in God's love ("Father"), we can rejoice in every action that he sovereignly takes ("Lord of heaven and earth"), even when those actions seem to us unpleasant, or lead to rejection and persecution.

The closing line in the prayer acknowledges God's motive in this behavior:

26 Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight.--Why does God reveal himself to some and hide himself from others? Simply because he wants to. The Savior teaches us that in such matters, we are not to try to probe behind the Father's prerogative. He does as he pleases. Such behavior would be considered selfish and arrogant on the part of a creature, but on the part of the sovereign creator, it is entirely appropriate.

In this prayer, our Lord may be inspired by Nebuchadnezzar's confession in Dan 4:35 (chart, Table 4):

Dan 4:35 And all the inhabitants of the earth *are* reputed as nothing: and he

doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and *among* the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?

Matt 11	Dan 4:35
25 Lord of heaven and earth	...in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth
26 for so it seemed good in thy sight	He doeth according to his will...

Table 4: Matt 11:25-26 and Dan 4:35

Nebuchadnezzar goes on to say, "At the same time my reason returned unto me." If we do not recognize God as "lord of heaven and earth," trust in his love as our Father, and submit ourselves to the mystery of his good pleasure, we will constantly be upset and depressed over the state of the world in which we find himself. Nebuchadnezzar's insanity is a picture of the despair of those who reject God's love and sovereignty. But our Lord's prayer provides the guidance we need to cope with a world that rejects our Savior and us.

God's selection of some for revelation and some for obscurity is arbitrary in the sense that it is motivated by his own good pleasure.⁹ However, our Lord calls our attention to one feature of this selection. People are not all the same. They differ in their capabilities and endowments. Our Lord observes that the Father's revelation tends to run counter to those natural capabilities, so

⁹ We also need to keep in mind that it is just: all have sinned, and all deserve damnation. It is God's prerogative to leave some in darkness if he pleases, and their subsequent destruction is only what they deserve.

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that those who are “wise and prudent” do not end up perceiving the Lord’s ways, while the “babes,” those with little natural understanding, are granted spiritual insight.

Paul observes the same correlation in a passage that may be inspired by our Lord’s words (chart, Table 5). Note the conclusion that he draws: “that no flesh should glory in his presence.” God’s purpose is to exalt himself, not man. He gives some men more wisdom than others, but then shows the ultimate futility of their knowledge by hiding himself from them and exalting those who in men’s eyes are least esteemed.

Matt. 11:25 thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent,	1 Cor. 1:26 For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, <i>are called:</i>
and hast revealed them unto babes.	27 But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; 28 And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, <i>yea</i> , and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are:
26 Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight.	29 That no flesh should glory in his presence.

Table 5: Paul and the Lord’s Thanksgiving

27-30, Selective Revelation and General Invitation

The prayer is over, and the Lord now speaks once more to the multitude.

This paragraph presents a striking dichotomy. On the one hand, it emphasizes what the prayer already makes clear, that belief is a divine gift dependent on God’s grace. On the other, it opens the door to all who are weary and burdened. In the history of the church, some emphasize one of these tendencies to the neglect of the other, but our Lord boldly juxtaposes them.

27, Selective Revelation

27 All things are delivered unto me of my Father:--What are the “all things” that the Father has given to the Son? They probably do not include the “all authority” that he mentions in 28:18, for up to this point he has not received dominion over the Gentiles, and sends his disciples only to Israel (10:5-6).

The subject of the rest of this verse, as of the prayer that precedes it, is revelation: God’s selective revelation of himself to the babes and not to the wise and prudent in v. 25, the special knowledge of the Father and Son of each other in this verse. The verb “deliver” παραδίδωμι is often used with regard to the passing on of information. Here are three examples (chart):

Mk. 7:13 Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have **delivered**:

Lk. 1:1 Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, 2 Even as they **delivered** them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word;

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Acts 6:14 For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses **delivered** us.

The principle that the Father is the source of true knowledge is not limited to the people discussed in v. 25. It includes the Son as well. He does not know anything by his own capability, but only by revelation from the Father. Recall how the book of the Revelation begins (chart):

Rev 1:1 The Revelation of Jesus Christ, **which God gave unto him**, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John:

The “all things” here describes understanding, not authority. Even then, this is not a statement that the Son knows everything. For example, it excludes the hour of his return:

Mk. 13:32 But of that day and *that* hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, **neither the Son**, but the Father.

He is not claiming to know all things, but rather saying that whatever he knows, he knows only by the Father’s gracious gift. He, like the rest of mankind, must depend on the Father’s sovereign revelation.

Now he goes on to describe two examples of the intrinsic limitations of human knowledge: understanding the members of the godhead and their relation to one another.

and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father;--His disciples must have been amazed to hear him say this. They thought that they knew the Lord Jesus. They lived with him day by day, ate with him, slept with him, talked with him as they walked on the road.

Indeed, John teaches that we can know the son (chart):

1 Jn. 2:1 My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: 2 And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for *the sins of* the whole world. 3 And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.

How can we reconcile these two?

First, even John recognizes that knowledge of the Son is something that grows over time, and is the privilege of the mature believer, not the babe in Christ:

1 Jn. 2:13 ... I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father. 14 I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him *that is* from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one.

Paul aspired to the knowledge of Christ as something beyond his present grasp:

Phil. 3:10 That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; 11 If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead.

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Knowing Christ is something the Spirit produces in us as we walk in the Spirit. It is misleading to say to a new believer, “Do you know Jesus?” The biblical answer would be, “Not yet. I know the Father; I have peace with him; but I do not yet know the son.”

There is a second difference to bear in mind. The verbs are slightly different. John and Paul use the simple verb γινωσκω, which corresponds well with our English verb “to know.” Our Lord, in both of his statements, uses the extended form of the verb, επιγινωσκω. This verb can mean “to know,” but it also sometimes has the sense “to recognize.” People might know Jesus of Nazareth, but only the Father recognizes him as his Son, something he declares at the baptism and again at the transfiguration when he says, “This is my beloved son.” Compare our Lord’s comment when Peter declares him to be “the son of the living God” (16:16):

Matt. 16:17 And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed *it* unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.

Modern believers sometimes show a disturbing familiarity with the Lord Jesus, as though he is a good buddy with whom they are on casual terms. It is precious to be in Christ and to have peace with God through him, but we must appreciate the deep mystery involved in the relation of the Father and the Son, and cultivate an attitude of the utmost reverence when we consider our Savior.

neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and *he* to whomsoever the Son will [chooses to] reveal *him*.--Knowledge of the Father is more accessible than that of the Son; the Lord at least mentions the possibility that the Son reveals him. In 1 John 2:13, even the little children “have known the Father.”

We should not miss the meaning of the verb “will.” This is not just the future tense, but the verb βουλομαι “to choose, counsel, decide.” Just as the Son has no independent knowledge but depends on what the Father delivers to him, we can have no knowledge of divine things unless the Son reveals them to us.¹⁰

28-30, General Invitation

The beginning and end of v. 27 are a sobering reminder of the limits of human knowledge. Many rebel against the notion that our knowledge of God depends entirely on the Son’s decision to reveal him to us, because they feel that it runs counter to the “whosoever will” nature of the gospel offer. The Lord apparently feels no such tension, for he follows these bold declarations immediately with an invitation to anyone who wishes to come.

We have seen three kinds of people in this chapter: a sincere follower (John) with some honest doubts, enthusiastic multitudes many of whom will later abandon him, and those who reject him outright. To all, he offers a common invitation, which is firmly grounded in OT promises connected with the coming kingdom (chart, Table 6).

¹⁰ See note on the relation between this order and Gal 1:15-16.

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28 Come unto me, all ye that labour κοπιᾶω and are heavy laden,	Lam. 5:5 Our necks are under persecution; we labour κοπιᾶω, and have no rest ἀναπαύω. Jer. 31:25 For I have satiated the weary soul, and I have replenished every sorrowful soul.
and I will give you rest ἀναπαύω.	Exod. 33:14 And he said, My presence shall go <i>with thee</i> , and I will give thee rest . Isa. 14:3 And it shall come to pass in the day that the LORD shall give thee rest from thy sorrow, and from thy fear, and from the hard bondage wherein thou wast made to serve,
29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me;	Jer. 5:5 I will get me unto the great men, and will speak unto them; for they have known the way of the LORD, and the judgment of their God: but these have altogether broken the yoke, and burst the bonds . [perhaps also 2:20] Jer. 31:18 I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself <i>thus</i> ; Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke [Targum]; turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou <i>art</i> the LORD my God. Zeph. 3:9 For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent. [LXX “ under one yoke ”]
for [that] I am meek and lowly πρᾶυς καὶ ταπεινός in heart:	Isa. 26:5 For he bringeth down them that dwell on high; the lofty city, he layeth it low; he layeth it low, <i>even</i> to the ground; he bringeth it <i>even</i> to the dust. 6 The foot shall tread it down, <i>even</i> the feet of the poor πρᾶυς, and the steps of the needy ταπεινός. Zeph. 3:12 I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor πρᾶυς καὶ ταπεινός people, and they shall trust in the name of the LORD. (the remnant who survive God’s judgment in Israel)
and ye shall find rest unto your souls.	Jer. 6:16 Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where <i>is</i> the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls .
30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.	(Jer 5:5; 31:18; Zeph 3:9 again)

Table 6: OT Roots of the Invitation

28 Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden,--The question he poses to inquirers is not whether they are chosen or called, but whether they are weary and weighted down. We need to start by confessing our need, and this confession is the essence of repentance.

This clause, like each clause in the invitation, is rooted in the OT. We could cite many passages that speak of labor as a result of God’s chastisement.

Lam 5:5 has three points of contact with our verse (chart).

Lam. 5:5 Our **necks** are under persecution; we **labour** κοπιᾶω, and have no **rest** ἀναπαύω.

In the LXX, it uses the same verb for “labor,” and also mentions the “rest” that comes up in the next clause. In addition, it describes the people’s problem as having their “necks” under persecution. The neck is where one places a yoke, and the prophets often speak of the “neck” of the people being under the yoke of the king of Babylon. For example,

Jer. 27:8 And it shall come to pass, *that* the nation and kingdom which will not serve the same Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, and that will not **put their neck under the**

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yoke of the king of Babylon, that nation will I punish, saith the LORD, with the sword, and with the famine, and with the pestilence, until I have consumed them by his hand. ...
11 But the nations that **bring their neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon**, and serve him, those will I let remain still in their own land, saith the LORD; and they shall till it, and dwell therein. 12 I spake also to Zedekiah king of Judah according to all these words, saying, **Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon**, and serve him and his people, and live.

The people “labor and are heavy laden” because they bear an oppressive yoke, imposed because of their sin. Later we will read of an alternative yoke that the Savior offers.

Lamentations was written when Israel fell to Babylon. Jer 31:25 anticipates the restoration.

Jer. 31:25 For I have satiated the weary soul, and I have replenished every sorrowful soul.

In the context, this verse concludes an extended prophecy of Israel’s restoration. In ch. 29, Jeremiah writes to the captives in Babylon, telling them to settle down, because they are going to be there for a while, and he rebukes false prophets who tell them that they will soon return home. However, there will be a restoration, and chapters 30-31 are occupied with the beautiful details. Finally, the Lord promises to refresh the weary and sorrowful, whereupon Jeremiah reports,

Jer. 31:26 Upon this I awaked, and beheld; and my sleep was sweet unto me.

Throughout the prophets, the return from Babylon anticipates the ultimate institution of the kingdom of God. The Lord is now offering this release from toil and bondage to his hearers. In Jeremiah it is the Lord Jehovah who offers the restoration. Our Lord Jesus makes this offer himself, thus claiming identity with the Lord of the OT.

and I will give you rest.--The words of the offer are drawn from Exod 33:14, as the Lord brings the people out of bondage in Egypt(chart):

Exod. 33:14 And he said, My presence shall go with thee, and **I will give thee rest.**

Again, the OT giver of rest is the Lord God, and the Lord Jesus does not hesitate to assume his place. Isa 14:3 also has the Lord God giving rest, this time at the end of the captivities:

Isa. 14:3 And it shall come to pass in the day that **the LORD shall give thee rest** from thy sorrow, and from thy fear, and from the hard bondage wherein thou wast made to serve,

The offer of rest in the OT is a pervasive picture of the coming earthly kingdom.

Many passages promise “rest” is promised to the children of Israel (Ex. 33:14; Dt. 3:20; 25:19). Consider particularly Deut 12:9,10:

Deut. 12:9 For ye are not as yet come to the rest and to the inheritance, which the LORD your God giveth you. 10 But *when* ye go over Jordan, and dwell in the land which the LORD your God giveth you to inherit, and *when* he giveth you **rest** from all your enemies round about, so that ye dwell in safety;

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Three features were incorporated in this ancient hope:

1. Israel (not some other nation or people)
2. would inhabit the land of Canaan, anciently promised to Abraham (cf. Gen. 12:7)
3. in a state of peace with her neighbors.

From time to time, Israel did enjoy this rest.

- Joshua (21:44; 22:4; 23:1) gave them rest during his lifetime, which ended about 1370.¹¹
- The book of Judges reports six cycles of judgment upon Israel for her sin. In each case, the Lord raises up judges, under whom the Lord gives “rest.” The total years of rest in Judges are 105. From the end of Joshua’s generation about 1350 to Saul, the first king, about 1050, is 300 years, so they had rest for only about a third of this period.
- The Bible history reports rest under four kings: Solomon (I Kings 5:4; 8:56), David (II Sam. 7:1), Asa (II Chron. 14:6,7; 15:15), and Jehoshaphat (II Chron. 20:30). Their reigns account for only 143 years of the total 457 year monarchy period, or about one-third of the time that Israel was under a king. Clearly, this rest was temporary, and far from the ideal that God had promised.

The ultimate “rest” would be enjoyed by the people during the coming earthly reign of the Messiah, according to Isa. 11:10.

Isa. 11:10 And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his **rest** shall be glorious.

Our Lord’s offer of rest in this invitation should be understood against this background. He is offering the people of Israel the Millennium, the kingdom of God on earth.

29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me;¹²--In Babylon, the people were under a yoke of bondage, because they had thrown off the Lord’s yoke, as Jer 5:5 teaches (chart).

Jer. 5:5 I will get me unto the great men, and will speak unto them; for they have known the way of the LORD, *and* the judgment of their God: but **these have altogether broken the yoke, and burst the bonds.** [perhaps also 2:20]

The prophets anticipate that when they return to the Lord, they will confess their stubbornness

11 Assume he was about the same age as Caleb, who was 40 when the spies went out (Josh 14:7). Then they were 80 when they entered the land about 1400, and Joshua died at 110 (Josh 24:29; Judg 2:8), bringing us to 1370. The people continued to obey the Lord during that generation, so we can estimate the period of rest as extending to about 1350.

12 It is common in evangelical commentary to understand “the yoke” in these verses to contrast to the burden imposed by the Pharisees in their interpretation of the law. Thus Carson: “The ‘yoke’ is Jesus’ yoke, not the yoke of the law; discipleship must be *to him*.” It is true that rabbinic Judaism speaks approvingly of the law as a “yoke,” but this is actually consistent with the OT passages cited here, and there is no reason to think that the Lord is contrasting his yoke with theirs. Methodologically we should prefer the a clear OT allusion to a rabbinic one. This understanding of the “yoke” follows Charette, NTS 38 (1992) 290-297. The difference is important: the Lord is not releasing his followers from God’s law, but exhorting them to carry it.

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(Jer 31:18), and willingly submit once again to God's yoke (Zeph 3:9).

Jer. 31:18 I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself *thus*; Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, as a bullock **unaccustomed to the yoke** [explicit in Targum]: turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou *art* the LORD my God.

Zeph. 3:9 For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent. [Heb "one shoulder," LXX "under one yoke"]

The Lord is announcing that now is the time for them to make that turn, and that the yoke they must assume is his yoke.

We are always under somebody's yoke, whether the yoke of sin, or God's gentle yoke. The point is the same that Paul makes in Romans 6,

Rom 6:16 Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? 17 But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. 18 Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness. 19 I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh: for as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness. 20 For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness. 21 What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things *is* death. 22 But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life. 23 For the wages of sin *is* death; but the gift of God *is* eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

for I am meek and lowly in heart:--We naturally fear to take on a yoke, for if the master is harsh, it will lead to suffering. But the Lord reassures them that he is no harsh taskmaster.

The two words occur together in the Greek Bible in only three places: here, and twice in the OT. The first is in Isaiah, who prophesied about 700 BC (chart):

Isa. 26:5 For he bringeth down them that dwell on high; the lofty city, he layeth it low; he layeth it low, *even* to the ground; he bringeth it *even* to the dust. 6 The foot shall tread it down, *even* the feet of the **poor**, *and* the steps of the **needy**.

Isaiah promises that in the coming day of the Lord, God will humble "the lofty city" and the meek and lowly will be in control. Zephaniah prophesied 80 years later, during the reign of Josiah, but makes the same point; he may be echoing Isaiah.

Zeph. 3:11 In that day shalt thou not be ashamed for all thy doings, wherein thou hast transgressed against me: for then I will take away out of the midst of thee them that rejoice in thy pride, and thou shalt no more be haughty because of my holy mountain. 12 I will also leave in the midst of thee an **afflicted** and **poor** people, and they shall trust in

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the name of the LORD.

By using these terms of himself, the Lord asserts that he is the kind of person who will prosper in the coming kingdom, and invites his hearers to submit to his yoke and become like him.

and ye shall find rest unto your souls.--The expression comes directly from Jer 6:16:

Jer. 6:13 For from the least of them even unto the greatest of them every one *is* given to covetousness; and from the prophet even unto the priest every one dealeth falsely. 14 They have healed also the hurt *of the daughter* of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when *there is* no peace. 15 Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush: therefore they shall fall among them that fall: at the time *that* I visit them they shall be cast down, saith the LORD. 16 Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where *is* the good way, and walk therein, and **ye shall find rest for your souls**. But they said, We will not walk *therein*.

The Lord is calling the people back to “the old paths” and “the good way,” in contrast to the false offer of peace (v. 14) from the faithless prophets and priests (v. 13).

30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.--He returns to the image of the yoke.

This invitation is a call to join the Messiah in his kingdom. Far from the easy believism advocated by many today, it calls us to take up his yoke—to become disciples.

Notes

Survey of ch. 11-16

Kingsbury analyzes 4:17-16:20 as a unified section dealing with the Proclamation of Jesus the King. Figure 1 shows an integrated structure extending from 4:18 through ch. 11, but how about the rest of ch. 12-16? Start with ch. 11 in case it looks forward rather than backward.

11: successive addresses to John, the multitudes, unbelieving cities, the Father, and finally a general invitation.

12: Highlights contrast between the response of the multitudes and the people, vs. that of the Pharisees. Growing opposition. Six paragraphs

- Two incidents with the Pharisees
- one with the multitudes
- two more with the Pharisees
- one with the people about his mother and brethren

13: Parables

14: more miracles (perhaps recalling ch. 8-9?)

- death of John (Herod as adversary)
- feeding the 5000 (multitudes)
- calming the sea (disciples)

15: two encounters, each expounded first to the multitudes and then to the disciples.

- Pharisees challenge him about washing, and he criticizes their tradition. Then speaks to the multitudes, and then to the disciples.
- Canaanite woman asks for healing for her daughter, which he grants. Multitudes swarm him; he feeds 4000, engaging the disciples. (Weaker unification across this section.)

16: Pharisees ask for a sign, and he foretells his resurrection. The disciples worry about bread. (Two examples of people missing obvious signs.) Peter's confession. The Lord predicts his passion (v. 20, intro to last section of the book)

The general dynamic in ch. 12-16 is thus alternation between confrontation with adversaries (mostly Pharisees, but also Herod, and perhaps the Canaanite woman initially), multitudes, and disciples. Distinguishes these three groups, a cline through which people must move if they would enter the kingdom. So see 12-16 as response to the closing invitation of ch. 11.

Multitudes vs. Disciples

Passages that show the difference:

Sometimes addressed together with the disciples:

Matt. 23:1 Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, 2 Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: 3 All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, *that* observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.

But they do not receive the depth of teaching that disciples do:

Matt. 4:25 And there followed him great multitudes of people from Galilee, and *from* Decapolis, and *from* Jerusalem, and *from* Judaea, and *from* beyond Jordan. 5:1 And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: 2 And he opened his mouth, and taught them,

Matt. 13:36 Then Jesus sent the multitude away, and went into the house: and his disciples came unto him, saying, Declare unto us the parable of the tares of the field.

Here and elsewhere, he attempts to draw aside from the multitudes with the disciples:

Matt. 14:13 When Jesus heard *of it*, he departed thence by ship into a desert place apart: and when the people had heard *thereof*, they followed him on foot out of the cities. 14 And Jesus went forth, and saw a great multitude, and was moved with compassion toward them, and he healed their sick.

(Leads to numerous references in ch. 14 and 15 where the disciples feed the multitudes)

They need to be reached.

Matt. 9:36 But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd. 37 Then saith he unto his disciples, The harvest truly *is* plenteous, but the labourers *are* few; 38 Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest.

Luke highlights the requirements for those who would move from “multitudes” to “disciples”:

Lk. 14:25 And there went great multitudes with him: and he turned, and said unto them,

- 26 If any *man* come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.
- 27 And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.
- ... 33 So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple.

Semantics of γενεα

Two main meanings: temporal and moral. Moral appears to be secondary, but well attested. Delitzsch on Ps 14:5: “They are so called inasmuch as דור passes over from the signification *generatio* to that of *genus hominum* here and also elsewhere, when it is not merely a temporal, but a moral notion; cf. xxiv. 6, lxxiii. 15, cxii. 2, where it uniformly denotes the whole of the children of God who are in bondage in the world and longing for deliverance.”

Ps. 14:5 There were they in great fear: for God *is* in the generation of the righteous.

Ps. 24:6 This *is* the generation of them that seek him, that seek thy face, O Jacob.

Ps. 73:15 If I say, I will speak thus; behold, I should offend *against* the generation of thy children.

Ps. 112:2 His seed shall be mighty upon earth: the generation of the upright shall be blessed.

It's clear that in these cases, the idea of similarity resulting from common descent dominates the temporal sense. Matthew contains clear instances of this usage:

Matt. 12:39 But he answered and said unto them, An **evil and adulterous generation** seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: *so vv. 41, 42 are likely used in this same sense*

Matt. 12:45 Then goeth he, and taketh with himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there: and the last *state* of that man is worse than the first. Even so shall it be also unto **this wicked generation**.

Matt. 16:4 A **wicked and adulterous generation** seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas. And he left them, and departed.

Matt. 17:17 Then Jesus answered and said, O **faithless and perverse generation**, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him hither to me.

Instances in Matthew where the term is clearly temporal are much rarer:

Matt. 1:17 So all the generations from Abraham to David *are* fourteen generations; and from David until the carrying away into Babylon *are* fourteen generations; and from the carrying away into Babylon unto Christ *are* fourteen generations.

Matt. 23:36 Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation.

The notion of “passing” in 24:34 would seem to make it temporal as well, though it is difficult to assign “all these things” to a 40-year period following the Lord's resurrection:

Matt. 24:34 Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.

But perhaps the very prevalence of the ethical sense of the word in every place except 1:17 should lead us to understand 23:36 and 24:34 in this sense as well.

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Two other words are sometimes translated “generation.”

γεννημα does not appear in the LXX. It is commonly used in the NT to describe the offspring of vipers or the produce of the field (“fruit of the vine”), and thus focuses, not on a period of time, but on the source or parentage. In terms of people γεννημα focuses on similarity resulting from similar parents, while γενεα focuses on similarity with our peers.

γενησις is translated only once as “generation” in the NT (Matt 1:1). It is a common translation in the LXX of תולדות.

Repentance

	נחם	
Μετανοεω	15	Nothing else significant
Παρακαλεω	58	Nothing else significant
Μεταμελομαι	6	Nothing else significant

Επιγινωσκω (v. 27) vs. γινωσκω

In the LXX, both can translate ידע, but with very different frequency, and offering different alternatives. The “alternatives” column gives the frequency of the nontrivial source next after ידע. “Total” is the overall total of the Greek word in the

	ידע	Alternatives	Total
γινωσκω	518	ראה 6x, נכר 0x	754
επιγινωσκω	48	נכר 35x, ראה 1x	149

επιγινωσκω has a distinctive sense of “recognize” that is much less common with γινωσκω.

Does the Son reveal the Father, or the Father the Son?

In v. 27, the Son claims the role choosing to reveal the Father to us. At first glance, this seems to run counter to Paul’s experience, in which “God ... reveal[ed] his Son in me”:

Gal. 1:15 But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called *me* by his grace, 16 To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen;

Alford suggests that the calling of v. 15 is his salvation, and the revelation in v. 16 is his further instruction in the things of God, as described in v. 12. And when God called him on the road to Damascus, it was the Son, not the Father, who confronted him: “I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest” (Acts 26:15), just as the Lord anticipates here in v. 27.

Antecedents of vv. 28-29

Francis, following Deutsch, suggests that the Lord is echoing Sirach:

Sir. 51:23-27 **Draw near unto me**, ye unlearned, and dwell in the house of learning. 24 Wherefore are ye slow, and what say ye to these things, seeing your souls are very thirsty? 25 I opened my mouth, and said, Buy her for yourselves without money. 26 Put your neck under the **yoke**, and let your soul **receive instruction**: she is hard at hand to find. 27 Behold with your eyes, how that I have but little **labour**, and have gotten unto me much **rest**.

But Gundry insists that the OT is sufficient, and the parallels cited in the study seem to bear this out.

What OT parallel could lead to the easy yoke? There are two LXX translations for על, each with another minority source:

	על	מאזנים	מוטה
ζυγος	27	14	
κλοιος	10		4

There is some complementarity in where they are used. LXX 1 Kings uses κλοιος in the protest against Rehoboam, while 2 Chr uses ζυγος. Isaiah and Ezekiel use only ζυγος; Jeremiah uses both, sometimes in neighboring vv (e.g., LXX 35:10, 11, MT 28:10, 11).

The OT references are mostly about how God breaks yokes. Jeremiah encourages the people to submit to Nebuchadnezzar’s yoke (MT ch. 27), but there is no suggestion that it is easy or light, and in MT 30:8 God promises to break it. There might be a linkage to the confession of those returning from exile,

Jer. 31:18 I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself *thus*; Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, as a bullock unaccustomed *to the yoke*: turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou *art* the LORD my God.

“Yoke” is added; the reference is simply to an “unlearned bullock,” but the training of a bullock consists of getting it accustomed to the yoke, and the Targum inserts such a reference directly, so the AV’s rendering is appropriate.

Other possible sources for “my yoke”¹³:

Jer. 2:20 For of old time I have broken/**thou has broken thy yoke, and burst thy bands**; and thou saidst, I will not transgress/**serve**; when upon every high hill and under every green tree thou wanderest, playing the harlot.

13 I follow here the excellent study of B. Charette, ‘To Proclaim Liberty To The Captives’: Matthew 11.28-30 in the Light of OT Prophetic Expectation, *NTS* 38 (1992) 290-297.

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Jer. 2:20 כִּי מֵעוֹלָם שָׁבַרְתִּי עֲלֶיךָ גַּת' קִתִּי מוֹסֵרְתֶיךָ וְתֹאמַרְי לֹא (אֶעֱבֹד) [אֶעֱבֹר]

LXX takes the first two verbs as archaic 2fs and follows the *ketiv*, Jer. 2:20 For of old thou hast broken thy yoke, and plucked asunder thy bands; and thou has said, I will not serve thee, With this reading, the reference is not to the yoke of Egypt, but to the Lord's yoke. LXX's reading is consistent with ch. 5,

Jer. 5:5 I will get me unto the great men, and will speak unto them; for they have known the way of the LORD, *and* the judgment of their God: but **these have altogether broken the yoke, and burst the bonds.**

Zeph. 3:9 For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent. לְעִבְדוֹ שְׂכֵם אֶתְּ דֹּ, compare LXX Zeph. 3:9 τοῦ δουλεύειν αὐτῷ ὑπὸ ζυγὸν ἓνα

Hos. 10:11 And Ephraim *is as* an heifer *that is* taught, *and* loveth to tread out *the corn*; but **I passed over upon her fair neck:** וְאֲנִי עָבַרְתִּי עַל-טוֹב צִנּוֹאֶרְהָ I will make Ephraim to ride; Judah shall plow, *and* Jacob shall break his clods.

Andersen and Freedman emend to “fair yoke” and compare Matt 11:29-30.